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XX

WITH this issue ends *OPINION*'s twentieth year. What an unfortunate year has it not been! Disaster upon disaster it has witnessed, from the breakdown of the first truly democratic and open Government and Party in Indian politics to the reestablishment in power of a former dictatress, now moving fast along the path to absolute rule and tyranny. That the responsibility for this falls on human folly, human greed, human knavery, human ignorance makes it none the less easy to bear. Nor is it that the folly, greed, knavery and ignorance have abated with the passage of time, that the people most concerned are now appalled by the results of their weaknesses. No, most of them swagger along quite at ease, and the general mass whose suffrages gave dictatorship its second chance, appear if not complacent, at least indifferent. One looks all round, and one sees no hope except in Providence. Its grace alone can save us from slavery. It can open the eyes of the people to the realities of our present situation and our likely future course. It can steel their nerves and hearts to resist evil and frustrate its success. But will it? Not unless it sees among us at least a sizable minority of sincere, principled, disinterested people, wholly opposed to evil and the wrong and willing to stand up to them happily and readily. So what about if, fellow-citizens? God's mercy be upon you!

POLICE-PRESS RELATIONS

K. F. RUSTAMJI

AT the time of the police centenary, some of us in the police proposed that a postage stamp should be issued commemorating the event. It was turned down on the ground that the police did not have a good

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image. The latest 5 paise stamp has the picture of a bloated sickly-blue pomfret, meant it seems to commemorate the pollution of our coastal waters.

Another prop of democracy, the press, should not ask for a stamp just at present. Like the police, the press does not have the cherished image of an exportable fish.

A friend suggested a via-media—the issue of a shark stamp symbolising the unrelenting hostility between the police and the press in the last 30 years—a carry-over of decadent nationalism in the press, and discredited colonialism in the police.

It is a fact that while police officers are sensitive to even the vaguest criticism made about their methods, they seem to take for granted the massive support given by the press to the improvement of their living conditions and the increase in police pay and facilities. The sympathy of the press when the agitation for better conditions of service boiled over into demonstrations against the government in several places all over India, saved them from the type of retribution that an unpopular force would have got.

The press has much to say against the police primarily because there is so much that can be said. Few of those who are arrested become friends of the police. Each man feels that it was a totally unnecessary arrest. And in many cases they may be right. One of the problems that has passed unnoticed for years is the large number of unjustified arrests that are made by the police. In a year about 15 lakh arrests are made in the IPC cases and about 30 lakhs under local and special laws in India. 90% of those arrested are first offenders. In almost 50% cases, the arrested persons are not prosecuted at all. A large number of those arrested pass through the stinking lock-ups and the dirty over-crowded jails of our country, languishing there for weeks or months, some times even years, without a hope of release.

There may be rare cases of torture or harassment which can be blown up, but there are everyday incidents of rudeness and illegal detention, which make the senior officers blue in the face whenever a paragraph appears.

Press reporters of Delhi took the whole country, and even the outside world, for an amazing ride on the subject of the lathi charge on the blind. It made sensational news. The callous police breaking up a blind procession with lathi charges—hundreds injured, groans of the blind in the police lock-ups, the broken spectacle frames, white sticks lying in hundreds on the pavements of a blood-drenched city. Oh! the shame of it all. And Government acted compassionately at once, transferring one officer and suspending another on press reports, which lent credence to the story that the police had lost their heads, and gone completely berserk. The entreaties of the police to hear their side of the story were disregarded; because on previous occasions when pressmen had pleaded for some comment on an important event, the telephone had been banged down officiously.

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Cartoons appeared on the front page ridiculing the police. The editors now took the story over. Editorials splashed acid and vitriol on the law enforcement agencies. It seemed to be the righteous indignation of a free, fertile and independent press. The editorials were entitled:

THE CALLOUS POLICE
SAVAGES AT LARGE
SAVAGE
DARKNESS AT NOON
POLICE GONE BERSERK

Slowly it began to appear that the real case which the blind wanted to publicise had been lost in a wild welter of charges.

"Were 50 blind persons injured?", I asked a police officer.

"No. Three blind persons were injured. They were minor injuries. One of them had to get two stitches on his scalp. Two policemen were injured—one below the eye and the other on the forehead."

"Are you sure?", I said. "I got the impression that there were a large number of people who got lathi blows, and many were in the hospital who were seriously injured. Anybody missing?"

"Only one person was referred to hospital because he complained of pain in his back. He had no apparent injury. He was kept in hospital overnight and was discharged. One person wanted to go to Lucknow for his University Examination. The police put him in a scooter and sent him to the railway station. He was shown as untraced. Another who was reported missing was traced in the blind school. The letter of the Principal that he was safe was not published. I swear there was no intention at all to hurt a single blind man", he continued.

"What surprises me", I said, "is that so many unbelievable things were said, and they were all believed, even by the Government."

"What about the incriminating photograph" I said, "which shows a policeman hitting a blind man?"

"See it carefully", he said, "You will find that the CRP man is carrying a shield in his left hand and a stick in his right hand. With his right hand he is holding the white stick of the blind man who is thrashing about with it. The policeman was not hitting the man. He was only holding the white stick."

"Are you sure?", I said.

"See for yourself." When I saw the photograph I felt that he was right. The CRP man was only holding the stick of the blind man. He was not beating him.

"What about another photograph that appeared in *"Sunday"*, I queried.

"That", he said, "is some sort of angular picture. Any picture with a wrong caption can mislead you easily. One thing I am certain about—no policeman would beat a blind man sitting on the ground. In the picture

the policeman is trying to take the white stick away from him."

"Could this confrontation not have been avoided?", I asked.

"Of course, it could have been. We could easily have taken RUNGTA and others in a van to the Prime Minister's house. We have no quarrel with them. On hind sight, you can avoid every mistake. But what is to be done when every class of person—whether doctors, scientists, lawyers, industrial workers, blind men—think that they will only be heard by authority if they have a confrontation with the police? In any case let us wait till the report of the judicial enquiry is released."

"That may show what happened", I said. "But nobody would be interested. Serious damage has already been done."

One fact which all police forces have to admit is that their method of maintaining public relations is utterly useless. Very few officers know how to maintain good relations with the press. We ought to take lessons from the best P.R. people in the field. Secondly, we have to find some solution to the impasse that occurs when a judicial enquiry is ordered. Once the enquiry begins, no attempt is made to put out the right version for fear that there might be some small contradiction that may appear later. Thus the police is muzzled. Everyone else is free to make the most outrageous charges.

Off Panchkuin Road, where the rich shop for furniture and elegant lamp shades in Delhi, there is a cluster of little rooms in a back street named the Institute of the Blind. A zig-zag street passes through the school like an ugly drain. The blind bruise their shins on the jagged stones, and bump into each other all the time. Gandhiji gave the blind a plot of land in 1947. The building is still under construction. Meanwhile they live in little holes of sorrow, so badly maintained that they are much worse than cattle sheds.

In these dark cluttered rooms, where the blind move by touch, mohalla boys periodically run through their miserable belongings, and the rain descends in showers. On the day that I paid them a visit a blind boy sat in one corner with a harmonium, pathetically singing "Ye Mera Diwana Pan Hai", and when he went to the high notes, I felt that I might crack. The sorrow of his little heart filled me with unutterable sadness. The sadness turned into anger at those who had neglected these handicapped people. This school is the exact opposite of the restful shrine, which is the right place for the blind. The evil is compounded by the fact that there is in-fighting between two groups, and periodically the blind break out into frenzied rioting, hurting each other and others around them. Last year a serious law and order problem was created with the result that a permanent guard had to be placed at this institution. It is a macabre fact that this is the only educational institution that is guarded in the city of Delhi.

The neglect that the blind suffer from is serious and it is under the very nose of the Ministries of Social Welfare and of Education (nobody knows clearly under which Ministry they come) and under the very nose of the Administration of Delhi. Grants are not given in time, and the

boys live on a totally inadequate stipend of Rs. 30 per month which covers food and everything else. They are frustrated and rebellious.

In the large amount of publicity that has occurred over the "lathi charge", not a word has been said about the manner in which we are treating the blind, the cause for which a procession was taken out to present a memorandum to the Prime Minister. What the blind are agitated about is not only the fact that they are neglected by Government, but because they feel that the whole attitude of society towards them is wrong. They do not want pity. They do not want the tinned milk of human kindness which is thrown at them by the devout, though that is their only food at present. They want the right to be treated as human beings, who can do a job of work. They want to be lecturers, teachers, announcers, telephone operators, lathemen; but despite all the instructions of Government nobody gives them a job. Nobody even gives work like chair repairing to them.

Blind voices spoke out one after another: "I am an M.A., LL.B.", one said. "Will I have to stand on a street corner with a 'lota' to beg for my 'roti'. There is only one braille press throughout the country. The amount of material available for the education of the blind is totally inadequate."

"Nobody listens to us because we are a scattered vote, although we are 9 million blind and 45 million visually handicapped."

"The Prime Minister has asked for a month to look into our grievances," S. M. RUNGTA, their General Secretary continued.

I expect long notes with social welfare jargon will be prepared in the Ministries, Committees will meet, expensive plans will be prepared, and yet not a single one of those in authority will visit the institution and see for himself the conditions in which the blind live.

A blind boy plucked at my sleeve as I was leaving: "Take me away from here", he said, "give me a reason for living."

These words keep knocking my brain like a ricocheting bullet.

It is easy to talk of police inefficiency. It is difficult to appreciate that in most states the strength of the police has not risen as required, though crime causative factors—like population growth, unemployment, prices—have become more serious. Some investigating officers are attempting to cope with 500-800 cases a year, though their proper case-load is only 150. Our police have just introduced computers—a vital tool for data processing; they have poor signal communications; and hardly any mobility in the modern sense. The least requirement is that the tools given to the police should be superior to those used by the criminals. Perhaps, the biggest handicap of the police are the laws and the judicial processes that have become completely out-of-date in today's context. So what is put down as police inefficiency by the press is the result of neglect or inability to reform institutions in the country. The police have to take the blame—as the shock-absorbers of the chariot of state—of all that goes wrong.

The very exaggeration of the crime picture and its innuendoes regarding police inefficiency give young criminals ideas about committing

crime, apart from creating a scare, as in Delhi. Several criminals have confessed that they took to crime because they felt that everybody was doing it, and there was small chance of the police catching them.

All over the world police have a strong sense of alienation, even of persecution, and an undue sensitivity to criticism. And they have one blind spot—a failure to correct injustice and brutality when the victim is suspected of a crime. A small paragraph in a newspaper, a film which shows the police in a bad light, can set police imaginations on fire. A man tortured to death only arouses the instincts of self-preservation.

This insensitivity, combined with a disdain for the press, creates hostility between the two, which is a handicap to both. The police refuse to meet the legitimate demands of the press for news, avoid press briefings, and then complain that a cane charge was exaggerated to brutality, that no publicity was given to the repeated warnings to a destructive mob to disperse, and it was made out that sudden rifle fires were opened on a group of innocent boys and girls.

The plain fact is that the majority of police officers are too secretive, and give no importance to the role of the press in a democracy. They also pretend ignorance of the fact that all police work depends on information, and all information depends on faith and trust being reposed in the police, and the best way to develop faith in the police is to be frank with the press.

Few police forces in India have developed the type of public relations that exist today in the Tamil Nadu police. The press and the police are closer in this state than in any other. It seems to me that this is because of the tradition that was started by Kamraj of being frank with the press, and depending on it for keeping back any information that would cause damage to the public. Individual officers have tried it and have succeeded each time, even in Delhi. There are numerous officers who know what the press needs. It is a certain type of news sense, which attracts journalists to them.

The first charge that the police have to make against the press is about their ignorance of police work. Most reporters have very little legal knowledge. Almost all of them have failed to do their home work regarding police procedure and regulations. A reporter poking round a police station can find nothing except complaints of police high-handedness. He does not realise that whoever is called to a police station will complain about high-handedness. Even if a man accused of a crime is asked, "How are you?", he will make out that he has been tortured. A woman pick-pocket, who is caught, at once complains of molestation. In some bootlegging groups, women immediately disrobe when they see a police raid and shout loudly, that their 'IJAT' has been attacked. Rape is now the easiest charge to level against the cops by any woman accused of a crime, or by any woman who wants to help her man. Besides, it is PORNO without 'BADNAMI' for the newspapers.

No reporter seems to be able to find out vital matters which depress

police efficiency. No one talks about laxity in maintenance of criminal records. They are in such a total mess that again and again you will find that a habitual criminal gets away because his previous convictions are not discovered. Few reporters talk about the non-registration of crime which generally occurs when a poor person goes to report an offence. Nor do they discover that many offences of grave nature are registered under inconspicuous sections of the law. The improper supervision of offences by senior officers is never mentioned. Improper use of manpower seldom figures. The inadequacy of patrol cars and radio is never mentioned. Faked encounters, which are a blot on the police, are seldom found out. Ignorance is so serious that an allegation of torture inside the jail in one newspaper was headlined "Police Torture in Jail" without knowing that there are no policemen inside a jail.

Once in a while the press makes a sensational leak—for instance, of the work of the National Police Commission—and it turns out to be a lot of incorrect rumours; or an item quotes the views of the Home Minister on a subject under judicial inquiry which he never mentioned at all. These can be dismissed as occasional lapses of the system.

On the police side, the recovery of a kidnapped child, the discovery of an unidentified body, the descriptive role of a chain-snatcher, or widespread cheating by a group of sadhus supposed to be transmuting metals—all these which are vital for the police—are not mentioned at all to the press. Ineptitude in public relations is a birth-right of the police.

We have produced excellent military correspondents, sports writers, and specialists in many fields. Crime reporting of the best type is still missing. Do we have men of the calibre of Woodward and Bernstein who exposed the Watergate scandal? Till the thrusts of journalism are built up, the police cannot be put on their mettle, nor can the correct results from police work be judged.

Perhaps there is undue secrecy of the colonial pattern that has led to this, or there is a lack of proper training in law and police procedure. Why should the Institute of Criminology and Forensic Science, which trains the whole lot of people connected with the law, not open its doors to people from the media who wish to specialise in crime and its problems?

Some police writers have now entered the field, and very perceptive articles by N. S. Saksena, Venugopal Rao, Attrey, Krishnaswamy and others have been published which show what the basic approach to police problems should be.

The greatest wrong done by the press is by occasionally inflaming communal passions by wrong or exaggerated reports of incidents which create a feeling of revenge or victimisation in a large number of people. There are besides cases in which investigations have been messed up by improper disclosures, or wild guesses which have imperilled the lives of persons who have tried to help the police. There was an interesting case in England a few years ago regarding press speculation—the famous

HAIGH case. Despite police warnings, a newspaper kept on speculating about prospective victims, which finally landed the editor in jail for three months for contempt of court.

If there is a crime outbreak of any type there is an immediate demand for the transfer of police officers in the press, often motivated by police officers trying for succession. The outcry about crime increase, which is due to social and economic causes encourages the use of improper methods, concealment of crime, and even leads to death in police custody. If, however, a systematic appraisal of the problem were made and the factors which were militating against a successful detection or crime control were analysed, the police would admit that there is an important part which the press has to play in detection and policing, which is nearly as important as that of the police.

One of the major causes of complaint by the police against the press is the behaviour of photographers, particularly at important functions where security is vital. This is the area of police-public relations where the Press Council should be able to set up norms regarding the number of photographers that should attend a function, and the manner in which they should conduct themselves.

To conclude, a solid bastion of effective law and order—in both the urban as well as the rural areas of this vast subcontinent—is a police force strong enough to provide ceaseless protection to every single one of its citizens at all times of the day and night. Superimposed should be a free press, poised to keep the nation's watch and ward body on its toes all the time.

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